

Labor Problems In Viet Nam

By VICTOR RIESEL

Mr. Riesel

There is no brass curtain stretching from the Pentagon to Viet Nam's ports regardless of what has appeared in this column. I get this from none other than Assistant Secretary of Defense Arthur Sylvester, who before he became a bureaucrat was a mighty fine newspaperman.

He scolds me quite indignantly for reporting that the Port of Saigon is clogged; that there is inefficiency; that there is corruption; that there is red-tape, rule-book creakiness delaying the flow of crucial food and supplies to U. S. troops and to the Vietnamese people.

Mr. Sylvester's loyalty to his chief is admirable. His indignation is understandable. What gets into the public print gets into the White House and to the President's attention.

It is, therefore, quite respectfully suggested here — and I do so not only as a columnist, but as chairman of the Freedom of the Press Committee of the Overseas Press Club — that Ass't Secy. Sylvester talk to the skilled union men who have just returned from self-sacrificing missions to Viet Nam.

Longshoremen's chief Ted Gleason would tell him, as he did me, that there are still horrendous and unnecessary delays in unloading scores of idle freighters amongst which are some of America's finest and swiftest vessels. The International Longshoremen's president reports that his recommendations made on Oct. 21, after his first survey trip to Saigon, have been virtually ignored.

He states that practically none of the unloading "gear" which he advised be rushed to the choked port has been dispatched. Instead he has been told that there are no funds available, though the unloading equipment would cost only \$8 million. This money would merely be advanced. The stevedoring companies would rent the machinery from the U. S. government on a per diem basis. Thus it is simply a matter of the government advancing the funds.

Mr. Gleason had recommended the construction of wooden pallets, for example. They would have taken a month. They have not yet been built.

Furthermore, most of the equipment which Mr. Gleason, side experimenter, said was vital is in Yokohama harbor.

Thus, freighters carrying desperately needed materiel have been worked only 40 per cent of capacity at any time, Mr. Gleason has charged. This is two and could be accomplished.

But Mr. Sylvester, who is chief Public Affairs Officer for the Defense Dept., tells me in some parts of Viet Nam cargo is being discharged "at rates comparable to major ports throughout the world."

Mr. Sylvester also objects to reports of lack of planning. However, he does admit that at the end of November 1965, far more than a year after the U. S. began bombing the enemy, there were 122 ships awaiting discharge of cargo. This, he says, was reduced to 81 by Jan. 7, "and the downward trend has continued so that we are not at a level which is necessary to maintain an efficient operation at the various South Viet Nam ports."

I am delighted to obtain Mr. Sylvester's analysis, though it came only after a full year of futile telephoning.

However, Mr. Sylvester is at odds with the public and private reports of three American waterfront labor delegations which have spent some time in Viet Nam.

These labor men have been warned — quite explicitly — not to talk publicly of what they found.

And it is repeated here again: They found corruption. They found ineptitude. They found, for example, that one Saigon waterfront facility was owned by a French company. This dock complex was not being used to its full capacity. Yet it was not until eight weeks ago that the military took it over to get "the stuff" to American GIs and Vietnamese soldiers and civilians.

For four months now — ever since Ted Gleason reported the presence of labor brokers — flesh peddlers — there has been little change in the hiring practices on the Viet Nam docks. Tiny women, weighing 100 pounds, still work as cargo slingers — and carry 200-pound bags.

If there is no brass curtain, why not permit the waterfront labor leaders to tell the full story to the American people.

More than cargo is involved. There are American risks in those jungle hills.